

A FAIR POSSESSION.

The Beautiful Islands of Porto Rico, Their Climate, Productions and People.

(By John W. S. Strouse, late Major, 47th N. Y. Volunteer Inf., Spanish War.)

Porto Rico—the Gem of the Antilles, a land of everlasting Spring—and a land where we Americans have done much injustice, principally through our ignorance of what the people really want and need—for Uncle Sam is a just taskmaster.

There are few of our people who know that Porto Rico comprises three more important islands—Porto Rico proper; Vieques, an island with at least 6,000 inhabitants, approximately 21 miles long and six miles wide, lying due east of Porto Rico; and Culebra, northeast of Vieques, a small and mountainous island, but with a magnificent harbor, protected from all stress of weather, which could accommodate the entire navy of the United States and England. This island is now a naval station of the United States, so made on account of its natural advantages.

Porto Rico resembles Florida in its climate, with the notable exception that it is never so hot in summer, nor so cold in winter. The coldest season is in January and February, when the average temperature is 56 degrees, and the warmest is in June and July, when the average is 72. The zero days of Washington and the 105 degrees in the shade of New York and Chicago are unknown to the island. The rainy season begins in August and lasts until December, but is not so terrible as many people imagine. It does not rain incessantly, but there are frequent heavy showers, after which the sun clears up with surprising rapidity. As the island is one mass of hills, and even

the southern part is inclined seaward, the torrents of rain disappear as rapidly as they come, and in a short time all is dry again, and everything is greener and fresher for the shower bath. Nor do the inhabitants seem to mind a drenching. There is no chill, and the light clothing, consisting among the poorer classes of a linen shirt and pair of trousers, dries quickly without any great inconvenience.

Porto Rico, besides being one of the most beautiful spots in the world, with proper care in the eating of tropical fruits, and if care is taken not to sleep in a draught, no fear need be entertained of the diseases peculiar to this latitude. To sleep in a draught, however, seems to be the source of most of the ailments prevailing among the natives, for colds and catarrh, consumption and bronchitis are common and often fatal.

The Porto Rican excels in social life. He has the fine manner and spirit of his Spanish ancestors, and adds to them the lighted spirit and congeniality of the New World—all this, however, superposing he belongs to the upper class, for there seems to be a sharp dividing line between the very rich and the very poor. But the spirit of the people is not so much divided as it is by the grades all classes, and the true Porto Rican treats his guest like a veritable returned prodigal son. It is not true that this courtesy and hospitality are mere affectation, or a series of social shams. They are not now and never have been. They are the result of a development of centuries, and your host takes a keen delight in administering to the wants of his American visitor. Enter a Porto Rican house and your host tells you in pure Castilian that "the house is yours." It is not a mere empty phrase, but comes from the bottom of his heart, and he will give you the best of his own.

During the Spanish-American war I was suffering from a severe attack of typhoid fever. A Porto Rican gentleman, a wealthy planter on the Isle de Vieques, came to my command, came to the old Spanish fort where my company was stationed, and insisted that I should go to his house, where I could have the best of medical care, and have conveniences which were naturally lacking in our camp equipment. As long as I have breath I shall not forget the care I received from his lovely gray-haired mother, who gave me joy on my recovery. This is not an isolated instance, but one of many which came to my personal knowledge.

Porto Rican cookery is at first a great disappointment to the American visitor. The use of olive oil instead of butter, the leaning toward onions, garlic and chilies, and the cooking of fruit instead of raw, and the use of unpleasant to the newcomer, who invariably rails against the table, and insist upon roast beef, steaks and the other delicacies of home. Another custom which falls to please the average American is the fashion of serving breakfast in the middle of the day. When one rises in the morning there is served coffee and rolls or bread, with perhaps an egg or two, which is eaten by the host and his family, and the only real meal, usually in courses, is served. The fish of the surrounding waters, though wonderful in coloring, are uniformly excellent, and the only disappointment will be met with in the oysters, which present a very small oasis of oyster in a large desert of shell, and have a copper taste to which one must become accustomed.

Coffee Culture.—More than important to the island's welfare is coffee culture. The tree is hardy and vigorous, and seems to thrive as well on rocky hillsides as in fertile valleys, though the planters seem to believe that it does best on sloping hillsides.

The tree grows well, and at four years begins to bear fruit. In exceptional cases it may occur at three, and where the growth is slow on account of unfavorable conditions, even at five years. Between 15 and 18 it gradually becomes less prolific, and at 30 finally ceases to bear.

A coffee plantation is a very pretty sight. The regular rows of small trees, the trim and graceful branches, the lustrous, rich green leaf, the aromatic snow-white flowers, and the fruit, beginning green, passing then to pink and then to bright red, make altogether as lovely a picture as agriculture can furnish. The tree ripens in midwinter, and the picking season lasts several weeks. Although enormous quantities are exported, it is very seldom seen under its own name, as the poorer qualities are bought up by unscrupulous

dealers and mixed with other grades to form the so-called "family coffee," which is a marked feature of the modern grocery.

Sugar Cane.—The Porto Ricans, however, regard the better qualities as the best coffee in the world. They prepare it in a way very different from that familiar to most American households. The first step is in the roasting, which is carried far beyond our standard, and the result is a fluid which, after being strained, is perfectly clear and transparent, despite its dark color, and which is a rich, velvety brown, and which cannot be too highly praised. It is said upon good authority that no other coffee is now used in the White House.

The most important product of the island is, however, the sugar cane, which has been raised there since 1550. The only difference between the culture of the cane in Porto Rico and the United States is that the machinery is as a rule, more out of date and the methods more crude. Practically no sugar is refined, and in all the families and in nearly all the hotels, the sugar is sold in a cream color, with the smell of molasses still plainly evident. It is, however, more pleasant than the American sugar when one becomes accustomed to it.

Tobacco.—Tobacco raising is third in importance to the culture of the island. The tobacco has been introduced into the United States, but has not met with much favor. Previous to the Spanish-American war large amounts of the product were exported to the United States, but there is a difference in quality which seems puzzling. The same leaf is used in both islands; it is grown under the same conditions, and by the same class of laborers. The climates are very much alike, except that of Porto Rico appears to be a trifle drier and more equable. But the difference is in the curing, and the Porto Rican tobacco will never, in all probability, become popular in this country.

A peculiar feature of the population of the island is the white race, even before the occupation by the United States troops, outnumbered the combined black and colored people, proving that Porto Rico, at least, has not become Africanized, as the case of the West Indian islands with the single exception of Cuba. About 75 per cent of the people are illiterate, but this condition is becoming rapidly ameliorated through the efforts of the American schools, which have a large and enthusiastic attendance.

The Natives.—The native people may, as a whole, be divided into four classes: The better class of creoles, who called themselves Spaniards, and who in point of fact are the descendants of military men who came to the island with Spain and garrisoned by Spanish troops, formed alliances and settled there. These people maintain their pride of birth, as do the old Spanish grandees, and a bluish tinge, and, in some, even opulent. They are a good-looking, happy and prosperous set of people, and have, as a rule, taken the trouble to acquire a considerable education, many of them being able to read and write. The ladies are, as a rule, handsome and refined, and are as strictly secluded as in other Spanish-American countries. Their goodness of heart and unselfishness, with their friends, are most charming.

The other three classes comprise the peasantry, known as *gibaros*; the colored people, or those of mixed blood, and the *negros*, who are the descendants of the laboring classes. There is, however, little or no race prejudice, and the white or even darker mixtures of the two races pass muster as whites, and not as in the United States, where the Moorish type is quite common, especially where there is a dash of African blood. This serves to make the eye darker, to give the so-called *negro* a bluish tinge, and, in some, even opulent. They are a good-looking, happy and prosperous set of people, and have, as a rule, taken the trouble to acquire a considerable education, many of them being able to read and write. The ladies are, as a rule, handsome and refined, and are as strictly secluded as in other Spanish-American countries. Their goodness of heart and unselfishness, with their friends, are most charming.

Political Conditions and Aspirations.—As to the aspirations and political conditions now prevailing in the island, Senator Tullio Larrinaga, the Porto Rican delegate to the United States Congress, may be quoted as an authority. He says: "The Porto Rican people have not been, and never will be, satisfied with the present bill. It is true that the evils attending a grant of independence are alleviated, but it is only because of the country's great resources and great recuperative powers, and also to the wisdom of the policy of the present Government."

"Section 7 of the bill did not provide for citizenship, and section 18 provides for an appointive Senate instead of an elective one. Every member of the Senate, the judiciary and, in fact, all officials, have to take a solemn oath to protect the Constitution of the United States, and many Porto Ricans have sworn to protect the flag of our country. Would such a right be given to a Chinaman? We believe that the duties imposed upon us also carry a right to the same. We are a great American people, the great Nation on the globe, will not deny to an enlightened people the privileges which rightfully belong to them."

Under the Spanish rule our people were ridden by the military, by the clergy and by the judiciary, yet we found a ready market for our tobacco, coffee, and our sugar in Spain, France, Italy and Cuba. To-day it is true that we have free trade with the United States, but our products are not bringing us the returns they did at the Spanish-American war, and the people have not recovered from the hurricane of 1899, which destroyed most of the coffee trees on our estates.

"We do believe, however, that the present bill is being done us in not through a wish to oppress us, but because the conditions are not understood by my fellow countrymen—and I believe I am a true representative of the Porto Rican people. I have been in Porto Rico for 30 years, and have taken as a representative type of Porto Ricans. His command of the English language, notwithstanding a slight accent, would put many an educated American to shame, and his courteous and dignified demeanor, his unflinching politeness and his capacity for making friends might well serve as a model for many of our American youths of to-day. Mr. Larrinaga built the first railroad in Porto Rico in 1880, and was instrumental in securing the first time American rolling stock in the island. He was for 10 years Chief Engineer of Public Works, and built most of the important works, especially the bridges, on the island."

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"I read your issue of Nov. 22, 1865, and I was glad to find that a number of years, caused by exposure while in the war, in an instant, as it were, I stood again on the levee of the Mississippi river at Memphis, Tenn., where I stood on the morning of April 27, 1865, as orderly for Maj. Gen. C. C. Washburn, in command of the post at that time. I well remember hearing the five his order in person to have the ill-fated comrades, who were floating down the river on planks, boards or any wreckage from the blown-up steamer Sultana, taken aboard the gunboat, and then, as they were, and others mangled in almost every conceivable manner. Yes, I can hear those orders ringing in my ears as it was but yesterday. They were words of death to the sympathy, the nature that would nerve every nerve in the direction of relief, and I am satisfied that everything was done that could be for the relief of the sufferers."

"A proper distinction; a very proper distinction!"

"Consequently I always feel an impulse to explain that I also include the Dutch people in the category, even though he gives me heart failure by his summons to speak."

An old aunt used to begin her sermons to us—

"The Baron Jomini—greatest of all military writers—says:

"The Swedish soldiers are the best infantry in Europe, and yet they are so few of them."

The Dutch people are undoubtedly the salt of the earth, but we cannot be too grateful that there are not more of them."

People who beat the mighty Atlantic out of a kingdom and bought New York for a jug of gin and some strings of glass beads cannot be too strongly admired as a race."

But we common people, who do not have Dutch blood in our veins and yet want some of the real estate and other good things of earth, cannot be sufficiently grateful among the Dutch. He has limited the number of Dutch."

Tom Paine said of the Quakers, that they pursued a guinea with a step as steady as Time and as remorseless as Death. No man on earth knows a good thing better than a true Dutchman. His step in pursuit is as steady as the roll of the hours, and his grip upon it as unshakable as the rock of Gibraltar."

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We cannot take a railroad trip without paying tribute to the uncrowned king of the transportation system, the Dutchman. He exercises a real, vital role over more people than a half-dozen of the little Kings of Europe."

Very truly, I light a lamp it burns in honor of another uncrowned Dutch potentate of the Standard Oil, who is dividing up the world like another Caesar, and getting more tribute from it than all the 12 apostles put together. Yesterday he divided the world with West with Russia on oil. Recently he divided it North and South with Italy on sulphur, and it is unnecessary to say that the Dutchman got the worst end of the bargain."

What possible show for anything worth having would there be for the rest of us if there were two or three times as many Dutch in the world? Into whatever town one may go he will find a man with a Van in his name, or similar wooden-shoe index, owning the best block on the best corner, doing his Sunday morning in the best of the church, holding mortgages on his neighbors' property, sleeping away the centuries in the cosiest, shaded lot in the cemetery."

He gets the light in everything. The rest of us must be content with seconds and culls. It is a wonder that while we are forced to admire him we are grateful to him. From staid, stout-hearted old Peter Stuyvesant, with his game-leg, to our placid, equable President, who is game all the way through, there has always been a Dutchman, a portion of stalwart Dutch among that."

"Small but glorious throng. Whose hands have pushed this lagging world along."

All the same, Mr. Toastmaster and the Toastmaster, I would include the Dutch people among the Dutch. We owe a vast deal to the Dutch than is represented by the mortgages on our real estate, our traveling expenses or our Dutch-made goods. More than to any other people we owe the Dutch for the very genius of our Government. Carlyle says that all our political institutions came out of the pens and forests across the English Channel."

We owe the Dutch for centuries of the most heroic struggling for civil and religious liberty and the rights of man. This must be quoted as an authority. Leonard, San Antonio, Tex."

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Comrade Bullamore, 24 Wis. Cav., thus describes the National Tribune, and features of the Steamer Sultana near Memphis.

In reference to the inquiry recently published in The National Tribune relative to the two scouts of Co. D, 31st Ohio, and the reply by Dr. Herbert S. Bullamore, a comrade who received from Comrade John Bullamore, Co. G, 2d Wis. Cav., Glenullin, N. D. He says:

"I read your issue of Nov. 22, 1865, and I was glad to find that a number of years, caused by exposure while in the war, in an instant, as it were, I stood again on the levee of the Mississippi river at Memphis, Tenn., where I stood on the morning of April 27, 1865, as orderly for Maj. Gen. C. C. Washburn, in command of the post at that time. I well remember hearing the five his order in person to have the ill-fated comrades, who were floating down the river on planks, boards or any wreckage from the blown-up steamer Sultana, taken aboard the gunboat, and then, as they were, and others mangled in almost every conceivable manner. Yes, I can hear those orders ringing in my ears as it was but yesterday. They were words of death to the sympathy, the nature that would nerve every nerve in the direction of relief, and I am satisfied that everything was done that could be for the relief of the sufferers."

"A proper distinction; a very proper distinction!"

"Consequently I always feel an impulse to explain that I also include the Dutch people in the category, even though he gives me heart failure by his summons to speak."

An old aunt used to begin her sermons to us—

"The Baron Jomini—greatest of all military writers—says: